

Notes on Small Press Publishing

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POEMATA Vol. 19 No. 4. July-August 2003

How has technology influenced small press publishing?

I don't think that technology is the biggest factor in the so-called desk top publishing revolution, except in the sense that print itself is a technology that is continually evolving. The evidence of this is in the fact that the revolution was going on long before technologies like Quark Xpress and photocopiers came along. Apple and Xerox just made it main-stream. If computers had never been invented, determined people would simply find other ways of producing books, even if it meant producing fewer copies. The thing is, I think making one book is a publishing project just as valid as making 10,000 books. In some ways, computerized layout and photo copying are counter to what I see as the spirit of Chapbook making, because they are automated, less hands-on. Personally I love doing design on the computer because the design programs are the conceptual medium par excellence - ephemeral ideas and images that can be manipulated as if they were concrete - but I think of the computer as another tool, like a stapler or a pair of scissors.

How has the small press and this technical availability changed what people interpret as a book?

The mass production of books and the assumption that text conveys meaning transparently makes us forget about the physicality of books. Chapbook production, on the other hand, reminds us that each book is an artifact, by abandoning standardized reproduction and using processes such as hand binding, hand lettering, limited editions, inserts etc., to enhance the unique value of each individual book and validate the artistic role of the book-maker. This relationship of the book maker to the text has interesting ramifications for our concept of 'the author'. I think of making books as a kind of performance, which reaches its audience when someone first picks up the book. An editor or book designer does not make a convenient representation of an ideal which was created by the author, but rather interprets the text in creating a new, albeit ephemeral, artifact, just as a musical performance is primarily itself and not a reproduction of the musical score.

The shift in the interpretation of 'book' is also linked to what the design mags call the dearth of print: the popularization of 'deconstructed' layout techniques, the incorporation of non-textual elements in the text, and the proliferation of font types. I would say, in fact, that the real technological advance for publishing in this and the last Century is the evolution of the font, which compels us to see letters as aesthetic shapes rather than just as part of words.

What unique ways have you found to market and/or distribute your books?

I think that the new idea of 'book' also involves an expansion of the domains where books are available or play a role. Thinking of books as performances or residual artifacts means that the line between the merchandise in a book store, Amazon books, and art books in a gallery, for example, becomes blurred. In traditional publishing, the emphasis is almost exclusively on

quantity: the more copies sold, the more popular the book. Canada Council recognizes a minimum press run or 300 books, recently increased to 500 books. There are at least two possible reactions to that: either make lots of books very cheaply so that they are free of very inexpensive and the audience is maximized, or else scale down distribution and concentrate on making a few books very well. I like the Coach House approach, which combines both options: distributing texts for free on the Internet, and providing books for book archeologists (those interested in artifacts). Also thinking of the book maker as a performer allows a greater creativity when it comes to the physical nature of books. In Toronto in the mid-nineteen eighties I rounded up 12-15 Small Press publishers and as a group effort, approached bookstores and box stores such as Chapters or Coles to promote and distribute Small Press. These were also listed on the new Amazon Bookstore site. After moving to London in the 1990's I stopped as Chapters and others only wanted local authors by local publishers, not National or International authors by local publishers. I would have had to apply to each district on an individual basis. The most sales though, come at the actual book launch. I have found that I can sell up to 50% of the print run at book launches or directly to the author, after their royalty payment.

How has funding for small press projects changed? How are you adapting? How does funding affect a publisher's choices of who or how to publish?

Funding didn't have a lot of meaning for me in the beginning. After helping establish the London Arts Council, I depended on three to four years of large arts grants between \$3-6,000. Before and after that I didn't worry about the money. I would probably put thousands of dollars from my salary or my credit card into the smaller scale Small Press Chapbooks or the occasional spinebound. As with most art, publishing is an activity for the privileged and a good desk top publishing program. The larger mid-size and large publishers depend on the Ontario and Canada Council Grants for their publishing projects, where rules are more detailed and punishing than Small Press doing what they can afford. A recent book review in London's Scene Magazine stated that HMS Press was a subsidy press. I wrote a really angry letter to the editor, Bret Downe and because of expressing my opinion to get the truth out there, I was banned from sending books for review!

How much do publisher's choices effect how a book is read? In other words, is a writer radical because she/he is published with X or is X radical for publishing that writer? How do content and status overlap?

When it's all boiled down, there's no such thing as a radical publisher, and no such thing as a radical writer either. It's doubtful that there is any such thing as a radical text; but I most definitely think that literature can still be a radical activity. It depends on the radical readers. A Harlequin can be radical if it is read a certain way. And reading, after all, is the activity that writers, editors, publishers, and the audience all have in common; the production of literature consists of various kinds of reading.

The responsibility of an editor who wants to subvert conventions is to read radically, and that reading will be evident in the editing, design and production. The performance of the text. How has the mainstream reading public affected small presses who can't compete on such a large level (or can't pay Indigo or Chapters for shelf space!) They have affected it by allowing some

publishers to become print on demand as Amazon et al. has converted to.

What effect has self-publishing or vanity presses had on the publishing industry as a whole?

I can't fathom the conflation of 'self-publishing' with 'vanity press'. The two are opposites. A vanity press takes advantage of its authors and of the pervasiveness of the myth of big publisher's validation, while self-publishing subverts the myth. The myth is that any text that hasn't been edited properly and published by a reputable publisher (one recognized by the rules and regulations of the Canada Council) in a standardized book format, obviously isn't worth reading. In London in the late 1990's this was also related to readings: 'If it's not happening at the Central Library, don't go'. Luckily that has changed for the better.) That of course is ridiculous; a lot if not most of the classics of English literature, not to mention experimental writing, were originally self-published. It has only been in the past Century, really, that it has become essential for a writer to be affiliated with a publisher in order to gain status as an 'author'. Literary grants don't usually recognize self-publishing for grants and the National Library has recently stopped providing CIP for self-publishing.

It is for this desire for respectability that so many insecure 'author' wannabes are willing to shell out big money for the privilege of having some Vanity Press name on their book. But when you think about it, serious traditional publishing has similarities to Vanity publishing. The writer gives up absolute editorial and design control in exchange for (usually piddling) royalties and the convenience of someone else handling the printing and distribution. HMS Press has always paid 10% Royalty in kind (book copies). It is entirely understandable that many writers want that convenience sometimes, but those are things you don't need a publisher for - you can do it yourself with minimal investment, especially given the accessibility of desktop publishing and the Internet. In other words, the fundamental reasons for the existence of traditional publishing are going the way of the typewriter (Millennials, you'll have to look that one up in the dictionary, oops, I mean Wikipedia.) The only thing that keeps big publishing going, in terms of literature, is the validation myth.

What choices do you make as a publisher? Do you look for radical writing?

I think that the saying 'you can't judge a book by its cover' is taken too seriously by most of the literary establishment. Of course an attractive cover design does not a good book make, but writers and publishers of the serious variety, and especially poets, tend to downplay the physicality of books completely and insist on clean white pages, the elegant font, the absence of decoration or illustration. They like to think of books as clear windows on pure platonic forms that exist in the author's mind, unsullied by contact with the visual or the concrete. It's a very totalitarian philosophy of book-making really, because it privileges the author as the sole thinking entity in the process. Nothing can be radical in that kind of environment. Radical writing depends on letting the reader interact with the text as an object, not as some transcendental message from the author.

What is the future of small press publishing in Canada?

Everyone in Canada will have computer chips implanted in their eyelids at birth, not unlike the implants inserted in our arms from the Covid Vaccine in 2020, with mini digi-screens that facilitate the consumption of textual materials during sleep. Periodically the content of the chip will be refreshed by connecting automatically to the Internet inter-web, a network of mandatory consumption for citizens, maintained by the Department Information, Entertainment and Un-Fake News and Stories. The alphabet will have been abolished and replaced by a standardized system of hieroglyphs with fixed unambiguous meanings based on Inuktitut. Hard print will exist only in antique library collections and on novelty T-shirts. In movies there will be a mythology of alternative publishers who hack into the Inter-web and disseminate subversive texts but in reality will be a fabrication designed to delude people into thinking that they really live in a country that cherishes free thought and expression. Also, authors and poets no longer sat in smoky rooms with a pen or a laptop and cigarette as smoking also disappeared. Smoking became associated with eating. Every movie and TV program showed the adult family at the dinner table. It became the greatest oral fixation next to watching the submarine races in the park. And then you know what happened. The government stepped in, raised taxes to raise money and force the fashion industry and the tobacco industry to perpetuate a totally new myth. Cigarettes were fattening. The fashion industry bought out the cigarette industry and created cigarettes with a minimum of 3000 calories in each cigarette for a total of 60000 calories per pack! Women and men, particularly writers and publishers, stopped smoking within two weeks, the atmosphere of the workplace cleared up, people could see each other on the streets, smell perfume, flash white teeth, enjoy the digi-screens! Cigarette production dropped off and finally stabilized at 5 per cent of its former ashtray glory. Secondary industries vanished and soon only one in ten humans were seen sucking back the thin one. Sales and consumption dropped even further and by the year 2045 AD, the average person knew nothing of cigarettes or smoking, was thin and healthy and showed that (along with ex Provincial Premiere, Wayne Gretsky), cigarettes were a thing of the past as were books.